

STATEMENT OF MAUREEN FINNERTY, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR PARK OPERATIONS AND EDUCATION, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS CONCERNING H.R. 765, TO ENSURE MAINTENANCE OF A HERD OF WILD HORSES IN CAPE LOOKOUT NATIONAL SEASHORE.

April 10, 1997

Mr. Chairman, it is a pleasure to appear before this subcommittee to present the Department's views on H. R. 765. This bill is intended to ensure maintenance of a herd of not less than 100 feral horses in Cape Lookout National Seashore. The bill also would prohibit the removal of any horses unless their numbers exceeded 110 and would require the Secretary to enter into an agreement with the Foundation for Shackleford Horses Inc. to provide for the management of the horses.

We strongly oppose the enactment of H. R. 765. If this legislation passes Congress, we will recommend the President veto the bill.

H.R. 765 addresses a specific resource management decision of the sort park managers make on a daily basis. Park superintendents make these decisions based on a myriad of interrelated factors including the mission of the park; input from local, state, and national interests; the policies of the National Park Service; and other considerations too numerous to list here. Such decisions are best made at the individual park level. Many of these management decisions are very complex and we understand the desire by Congress to intervene. However, we believe Congressional action sets a disturbing precedent that will lead to legislation being proposed each time a management decision is questioned.

We believe that there is a management program at the Cape Lookout NS that meets, and in all likelihood exceeds, the intent, purpose and requirements of this bill. The present management program assures a

permanent population of free-roaming horses on Shackleford Banks. The program provides for the removal and public adoption of surplus horses through the Foundation for Shackleford Horses Inc. and permits a horse management partnership between the non-profit Foundation and the National Park Service.

The enabling legislation for Cape Lookout National Seashore did not address the issue of free-roaming feral horses on Shackleford Banks. Through public input to our General Management Plan in the late 1970s, we recognized the public concern and interest in the horses. Accordingly, in our 1982 General Management Plan we stated that we intend to maintain a representative herd of free-roaming horses on Shackleford Banks. We have reaffirmed that commitment in responses to Congressional inquiries, letters to State and local elected officials, special interest groups, and the general public. We have also confirmed that commitment as a preferred alternative in the Environmental Assessment (EA), which was produced to specifically address the horse management issues on Shackleford Banks.

Let me assure the membership of this subcommittee, the National Park Service is committed to maintaining a representative population of free-roaming horses on Shackleford Banks. We intend to have a herd that is genetically viable at a population level that will minimize adverse impacts on the natural resources of the barrier island.

In 1996, following a series of public meetings, discussions with members from the scientific community, and other professional managers of feral horse herds, the park developed a draft EA with alternatives for managing the Shackleford Banks horse herd. A final EA, and a horse management plan, was

prepared following further public meetings. The Service's preferred alternative was a one-time roundup of horses on the island, removing all but 50 to 60 horses and offering the surplus horses for public adoption. Immunocontraception would then be used for future population control. That plan, while acceptable to the general public, brought very vocal opposition from special interest groups who opposed any management intervention. Some of the opposition was based on the opinion that these horses were descended from stock off Spanish ships wrecked along the coast and had roamed the island for over 400 years without interference, and had adapted and survived in a harsh environment on limited forage and water supplies.

There is no documented evidence that the Shackleford Banks horses are descendants of any horses shipwrecked on the coast. Preliminary DNA tests of blood samples collected from horses on Shackleford do not support this contention. Preliminary analysis, conducted by Dr. Gus Cothran at the University of Kentucky indicate that the horses on Shackleford are related to "South American Iberian" breeds and domestic breeds such as the Standardbred, Saddlebred and Morgan and Tennessee Walkers. These breeds do, however, have a "Spanish" ancestry which is common in domestic horses throughout the United States. Dr. Cothran will also be providing his analysis concerning what would be the minimum population that could be maintained on the island and still be genetically viable. A final report concerning these issues should be available this summer.

Likewise, there is no documentation that these horses are descended from earlier herds of free-roaming horses on the Outer Banks. Because approximately 500 people lived on Shackleford Banks, an island of approximately 2,500 acres, during the mid-1800s, it is highly unlikely that horses roamed freely on

this island during that period. In all likelihood, horses currently on the island descended from domestic stock released by their owners when the inhabitants left the island in the late 1800s. Also, mainland horse owners transported and released horses on Shackleford when the stock no longer served their needs. Stock was also removed at intervals and sold on the open market.

The health of the horse herd is unknown at this time. One researcher, who has studied the Shackleford horses for 15 years, has observed that, as the maritime forest and shrub communities grow and expand, existing marsh and grasslands will be lost to the horses for grazing, and in time the island will probably not support more than 75 horses. Veterinarians from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture Veterinary Division, who conducted the recent roundups for the Service observed that, except for the stud horses, which were in reasonably good health, the remaining herd could best be categorized as in fair to poor condition. They noted the herd was generally stunted in growth and had short life spans. This suggests a poor diet and probably a heavy internal and external parasitic load. A young colt that died in February 1997 was necropsied and found to have died from malnutrition although there was fresh grass in its stomach. A heavy parasite load contributed to its condition.

On November 11, 1996, state veterinarians from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, through a Memorandum of Agreement with the National Park Service, initiated a roundup of the Shackleford horses. The original plan was to round up the island horses, remove them to a stockyard on the mainland, test them for Equine Infectious Anemia (EIA) and euthanize infected horses. The rest of the herd would be retested for EIA after 60 days. If the herd was clean, surplus horses would be offered for adoption and the remainder of the herd returned to Shackleford Banks. Because the issue became

controversial, the plan was modified by securing all the blood samples while the horses were corralled on Shackleford Banks rather than moving the horses to the mainland. The Service also agreed to increase the island resident population of horses from the original proposal of 50-60 to between 75-100 horses as an initial level until the genetic diversity of the herd could be established and the carrying capacity of the range studied. The state veterinarians also agreed to consider a quarantine site on the mainland if such a site could be identified in a timely manner.

Based on information developed by an independent researcher, we had anticipated a herd population of 220 to 230 horses, but found only 184. Of this number, 76 horses tested positive for EIA and were removed to the mainland for temporary quarantine. The Foundation for Shackleford Horses, Inc., had offered to take EIA positive horses and quarantine them for life. The Service had agreed to transfer the horses to the Foundation if it could secure a site that met State of North Carolina Veterinary Division requirement. When no site was found, the EIA positive horses were euthanized and disposed of in an approved landfill. The 108 EIA negative horses were released to the island.

Realizing the park would need professional services and public support for a long-term horse management program, in December 1996 the National Park Service established the Shackleford Banks Horse Council as a working committee to assist the park with plans for managing the horses. A wide variety of interests and stakeholders are represented on the Council. I will be glad to provide a list of members for the record. The Council has met twice and has initiated action on reviewing a number of broad issues regarding the management of the horse herd. Its March 1997 meeting was deferred until April because of the scheduled second roundup on Shackleford Banks.

During the week of March 10, 1997, a second roundup and testing program was conducted on Shackleford horses. The Service rounded up 103 horses. Five horses from the first roundup apparently died over the winter. Of the 103 horses, five horses tested positive for EIA. By this time, the Foundation of Shackleford Horses, Inc., had secured a state-approved quarantine site and the five EIA positive horses were transferred to it. In the transfer document, the Foundation and the Service committed to develop a long-term Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to cooperate in the management of the Shackleford Banks horses. On an interim basis, the Service issued a special use permit to the Foundation to allow it to assist with the management of the herd.

We believe the National Park Service is in the best position to address and respond to the needs of the Shackleford Banks horse herd. The Service has demonstrated a commitment to maintaining a permanent horse herd at Cape Lookout National Seashore. Through establishment of the Shackleford Banks Horse Council, the Service has further demonstrated its commitment to involve the local community, local and State Governments, the private sector, the Foundation for Shackleford Horses, Inc., and the professional community in caring for the long-term needs of these horses. We believe that existing authorities and regulations provide for the management of the Shackleford Banks horses. Additional legislation is not necessary, and could adversely affect work that has already been accomplished.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared remarks. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.